Road of the Warriors

The Milky Way

Star Lore

Part 1 - Europe, Middle East, Asia

The Milky Way is our home galaxy. Our sun is one of an estimated 100 to 400 billion stars in this galaxy.

Before the invention of the telescope, the Milky Way was observed only as a hazy band of light in which no individual stars could be distinguished. This mythical band is the source of many myth around the world. In different cultures,has been seen as many different things - as a bridge, as a castle, as a bird path, as the sparks of the horseshoes of an advancing army and even literally as spilled milk.

Ancient Mesopotamia

In the Babylonian creation myth Enûma Eliš, the Milky Way is created when Marduk slayed the primeval salt water dragoness Tiamat, severed her tail and placed it in the sky.

In ancient Babylonia religion, *Tiamat* is the primordial goddess of the salt sea. She mated with Abzû, the god of fresh water, to produce younger gods. *Tiamat* is the symbol of the chaos of primordial creation.

Source:Wikipedia

Cylinder seal, 8th century BC, believed to depict the slaying of Tiamat.
Source:Wikipedia

Ancient Egypt

In Egyptian mythology, the Milky Way was seen as a pool of cow's milk related to the fertility cow-goddess Bat.

Bat was depicted as a female human face with cow ears and horns. Other depictions showed her as a human woman.

Bat is one of the oldest Egyptian deities, dating back to the the earliest records of the religious practices in ancient Egypt. Later, by the time of the Middle Kingdom, her identity and attributes were subsumed within that of the goddess Hathor.

Source:Wikipedia

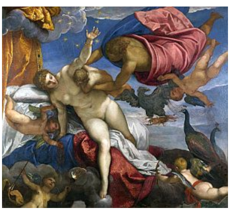
Bat as a woman
Brooklyn Museum

Bat as a cow; Metropolitan Museum of Art

Ancient Greece

Γαλαξίας (Galaxias), the Greek name for the Milky Way is derived from γάλα (gala), the Greek word for milk. In Greek mythology, there are two legends about how the Milky Way was created. Both stories are centered around Heracles, a mortal son of Zeus, and Hera, Zeus' wife.

In the first story, as told by Wikipedia, Heracles was born of the mortal woman Alcmene. In order to endow his mortal son with godlike qualities, Zeus let him suckle on his divine wife Hera's milk when she was asleep. When Hera woke up, she pushed Heracles away and the spurting milk became the Milky Way.


The Origin of the Milky Way; Tintoretto
ca. 1575–1580; Source: Wikipedia

In a different version, also told by Wikipedia, Heracles was abandoned in the woods by his mortal parents, Amphitryon and Alcmene. His father Zeus sent Athena, goddess of wisdom, to retrieve him. Athena decided to take him to Hera who agreed to suckle Heracles. As Heracles drinks the milk, he bites down, and Hera pushes him away in pain. The milk that squirts out forms the Milky Way.

The first scholars to speculate that the Milky Way consisted of stars too far away to be individually distinguished were Greek philosophers Anaxagoras (ca. 500–428 BC) and Democritus (460–370 BC).

Source:Wikipedia

The Great Rift is a group of dark dust clouds, significantly obscuring parts of the Milky Way for observers on Earth.

In Greek mythology, the Great Rift is sometimes seen as the path of devastation left by Phaeton, who tried to guide the chariot of of his father, the Sun god Helios across the sky. Phaeton lost control over the chariot, wreaking havoc before being struck down by a Zeus' lightning bolt. The northern Coalsack Nebula, which marks one end of the Great Rift is seen as the end of Phaeton's trail of devastation.

The fall of Phaeton; Wikipedia

In another Greek myth, the trail carved by Phaeton is seen as the constellation Eridanus.

Sources: Wikipedia, oneminuteastronomer.com

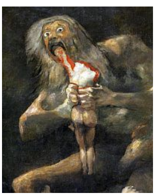
Ancient Rome

Roman author Gaius Julius Hyginus puts a different spin on the idea of squirting milk.

In a story told by Wikipedia, Roman god Saturn swallowed his children to ensure his position as head of the Pantheon. His wife, the goddess Ops conceived a plan to save her newborn son Jupiter: She wrapped a stone in infant's clothes and gave it to Saturn to swallow. Saturn asked her to nurse the child once more before he swallowed it, and the milk that spurted when she pressed her nipple against the rock eventually became the Milky Way.

The story is told in Chapter 43 of Book 2 of Poeticon astronomicon. However, in Erhard Ratdolt's Illustrations of Poeticon astronomicon, the Milky Way was shown as a Band of Stars.

Sources: Wikipedia, Library of Congress


Saturn Devouring His Son
Francisco Goya, ca. 1819-1823
Source: Wikipedia

Medieval Islamic Astronomy

Ian Ridpath tells us, that "...to the Arabs of the Middle Ages the Milky Way was known as al-madjarra, from a word meaning a place where something is pulled or drawn along, such as a cart track."

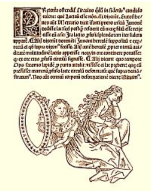
Persian astronomer Abū Rayhān al-Bīrūnī (973–1048) described the Milky Way as "... a collection of countless fragments of the nature of nebulous stars."

Syrian scholar Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya (1292–1350) proposed that the Milky Way is "a myriad of tiny stars packed together in the sphere of the fixed stars."

Sources: Ian Ridpath, Wikipedia, islam.wikia.org

Leiden Arathea

One of the first graphic depictions of the Milky Way as a circular band of stars can be found in Erhard Ratdolt's version of Poeticon Astronomicon, published in Venice in 1482.

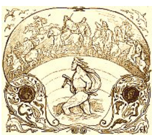

Milky Way as a Band of Stars
Poeticon Astronomicon
Source: fineartamerica.com

Norse Mythology

Bifröst, a burning rainbow bridge that reaches between Midgard (Earth) and Asgard (the realm of the gods) is described in 13th century Norse mythology in both the Poetic Edda and the Prose Edda.

Scholars have proposed that the bridge may have originally represented the Milky Way.

Source: Wikipedia

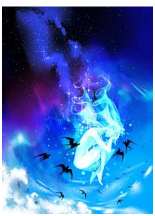

Thor and the æsir crossing Bifröst
Lorenz Frølich, 1895; Wikipedia

Finnish and Baltic Mythology: The Pathway of the Birds

Migratory Birds use the Milky Way as a guide to travel south. Long ago, the Finns observed that phenomenon. In Finnish mythology, the birds were traveling along the Milky Way to *Lintukoto* the home of birds - a warm region at the edges of Earth , where the birds lived during the winter.

Elia Mervi tells a Finnish legend, in which the birds were guided by a white bird with the head of a maiden who chases them to find their way. She was the goddess Lindu, the queen of the birds and daughter of the god of the sky, Uko.

After rejecting the suits of the sun and the moon for being too predictable in their movements and the Pole Star for being fixed, she fell in love with the light of the North for her beauty. They compromised, but the unpredictable and wild Northern Light soon left. Lindu's tears fell in her veil, becoming the milky way while her father took her to the sky where she could reign by his side and thus guide the migration of the birds, following the star path of Lindu's veil.


Lindu's astral veil
© Katherine Makoyana

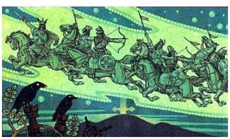
the Milky Way is called *Linnunrata* in Finnish, *Linnutee* in Estonian, *Paukšèių Takas* in Lithuanian and *:Putnu Ceļš* in Latvian, all meaning Pathway of the Birds.

Sources: Elia Mervi, Wikipedia, Sauer, Emlen, 1971: Celestial Rotation and Stellar Orientation in Migratory Warblers, Mouritsen, Larsen, 2001: Migrating songbirds use stellar cues for a time-independent compass

Hungarian Mythology

In Hungarian Mythology, the Milky Way is called *Hadak Útja* - The Road of the Warriors. The stars are interpreted as sparks from the horseshoes of the horses of Prince Csaba an his warriors.

In Hungarian legends, Csaba, the mythical son of Attila the Hun is the ancestor of the Hungarians. Wikipedia tells us, that after Csaba's death, the Huns had no one to take his place. Seizing their chance, the enemies of the Huns launched an assault on the Hun kingdom.


Prince Csaba and his warriors on the Milky Way
by Bertalan Székely; Source: maghon.weebly.com

As they met on the field of battle, the enemy generals mocked the Huns, saying "and who will save you now that Csaba is gone?" But no sooner had those words been spoken, a bright pathway consisting of stars appeared in the night sky and Csaba rode down at the head of an army from the heavens, routed the invaders and saved the Huns once again.

Source: Wikipedia

Irish Mythology

In Irish Mythology, there are several different names and several different legends associated with the Milky Way.

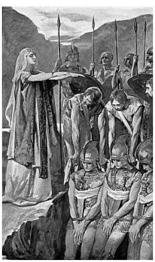
The most common name is *Bealach na Bó Finne* — Way of the White Cow. It is also called *Mór-Chuing Argait* — the Great Silver Yoke, which refers to the sacred River Boyne and *Earball na Lárach Báine* - the White Mare's Tail or *Smir Find Fedlimthi* - the White Marrow of Fedlimid.

Fedlimid mac Daill was the bard of King Conchobar mac Nessa in the Ulster Cycle of Irish Mythology. His daughter Deirdre and her lover Naoise fled from Conchobar to Scotland.

Eventually Conchobar had Naoise and his brothers killed. When they were to be buried, Deirdre threw herself into their grave. Angered, Conchobar exhumed the bodies and buried them separately, but a tree grew from each grave and the branches entwined. Again, Conchobar had them dug up and buried on opposite sides of a lake; but then, a great cluster of stars appeared across the sky, connecting the two graves.

The band of stars was called *Sgríob Chlann Uisnich* - The Track of the children of Uisneach, after Naoise and his brothers Ardan and Ainnle.

Source: Wikipedia


Deirdre's lament
Painting by J. H. F. Bacon
Charles Squire: Celtic Myths & Legends, Poetry & Romance

Welsh Mythology

In Wales, the Milky Way is called *Caer Wydion*, Wydion's Castle.

Gwydion is a magician, hero and trickster who appears in several tales of Welsh Mythology.

Source: Wikipedia

Gwydion; prydain.fandom.com

Pilgrimage Routes

In several European cultures, the Milky Way is related to routs taken by christian pilgrims.

On the **Iberian Peninsula**, the Milky Way is called The Road to Santiago (*Camí de Sant Jaume* in Catalan, *Camiño de Santiago* in Galician, *Estrada de Santiago* in Portuguese and *Camino de Santiago* in Spanish), referring to the Way of St. James, a leading Catholic pilgrimage route since the 9th century with the final destination being the Shrine of the apostle Saint James the Great in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia in northwestern Spain.

In return, the pilgimage route is sometimes called *La Voje Ladee*, which is Spanish for Milky Way.

Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela
Source: Wikipedia

One of the titles used for the Milky Way in **England** is *Walsingham Way*, referring to the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham, a popular pilgrimage site in Walsingham, Norfolk, England. The Milky Way was a guide to the pilgrims. It also represents the pilgrims who flock at the shrine.

In **Slovenia**, the Milky Way is called *Rimska Cesta*, the Roman Road as it was used as a guide by pilgrims on their way to Rome.

Source: Wikipedia,

National Pilgrimage to Walsingham
Source: Wikipedia

Armenia

In Armenia, the Milky Way is called Հարդագողի ճանապարհ (pronounced hardagoghi chanaparh), the "Way of a Man who had stolen the Straw".

In Armenian Mythology, during a very cold winter, Vahagn, the Armenian god of fire and thunder stole straw from the Assyrian king Barsham and brought it to Armenia to aid his people. When Vahagn fled across the heavens, some of the straw was spilled along the way.

The Straw-Thief myth spread from Armenia to Mongolia in the east and North Africa in the southwest. The Milky Way is called *the route of scattered straw* in Chechen, *Godfather's straw* in Croatian, *Straw Thief* in Kurdish, *Straw-drawing* in Persian, *the Way of Straw* in Sardinian, *Road of Thieves* in Syriac and *Road of Straw* in Turkish.

Sources: Wikipedia, Armenian Astronomical Society

Statue of Vahagn in Yerevan
Source: Wikipedia

Hindu Mythology

In Hindi, the Milky Way is called *Akasaganga*, the Ganges River of the Sky.

In the Bhagavata Purana, a Hindu collection of stories, the heavens are called *œiœumãra cakra*, the dolphin disc.

All the visible stars and planets moving through space are likened to a dolphin that swims through the water. The Milky Way forms the abdomen of the dolphin.

Source: Wikipedia

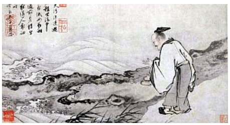
Manuscript page of Bhagavata Purana
Source: Wikipedia

Chinese Mythology

In Chinese, the Milky Way is called *Tianhe*, written 天 河, meaning Celestial River or River of Heaven.

Where the Milky Way crosses the constellation Cygnus, the Great Rift, is a group of dark dust clouds, significantly obscuring parts of the Milky Way for observers on Earth relates to a Chinese asterism called *Tiānjīn* (天 津), the Celestial Ford.

The dark patches are seen as a particularly shallow ford across the Celestial River. Source: Ian Ridpath



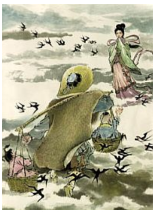
Creation of the Milky Way, Guo Xu, 1503
Sources: Shanghai Museum, localiiz.com

The Celestial River is also part of one of China's most popular myth, the tale of The Cowherd and the Weaver Girl. Vega's asterim, the *Weaving Girl* is also called *Celestial Granddaughter*, as in Chinese legends, *Weaving Girl* was the granddaughter of the celestial emperor.

In this story, *Niulang*, a poor Cowherd, represented by the star Altair (α Aql) falls in love with *Zhi Nü* (Weaving Girl) a celestial princess represented by the star Vega (α Lyr).

The celestial emperor (in some versions the celestial empress) did not approve of the relationship and ordered the couple to be separated by a celestial river (the Milky Way). They were only allowed to meet once a year. On the seventh day of the seventh lunar month, the magpies would spread their wings together to form a bridge, enabling the tragic lovers in heaven to meet that night."

Source:Hong Kong Space Museum, Wikipedia extensive, illustrated versions of the tale can be found at All Things Chinese and localiiz.com.



Cowherd and Weaving Girl
Source: Hong Kong Space Museum

The tale is considered one of China's greatest folk tales.

The Qixi Festival, commemorating the two lovers has been celebrated on the 7th day of the 7th lunar month for the last 2,000 years, dating back to the Hab Dynasty.

Similar festivals take place in Japan (Tanabata Festival) and Korea (Chilseok Festival).

Source: Wikipedia

Cowherd and Weaving Girl
Source: All Things Chinese

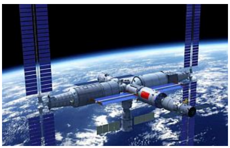
Modern Day Technology

Another translation for *Tianhe* is "Joining of the Heavens."

For that reason, the name was chosen for the core module of the planned Chinese Modular Space Station.

The core model was launched on April 29, 2021. Eventually, it will connect two space station modules, a manned spacecraft and a cargo spacecraft.

Source: Asia Times



Artist's concept of the Chinese modular space station
Sources: Asia Times

Tianhe is also the name of two Chinese super computers, Tianhe-1 and Tianhe-2.

Back to Milky Way Start Page

Forward to North America

Back to Star Lore Start Page	Back to Mythology Start Page	Back to Milky Way Myths Page	Back to Space Page	Back to English Main Page	Back to Start Page